

## André Grabar

1896–1990

With the death of André Grabar, on the fifth of October, 1990, Byzantine art and archaeology lost one of their greatest and most renowned interpreters. In a remarkable career, which spanned the greater part of this century, André Grabar transformed the study of the visual arts of Byzantium and eastern Europe, leaving behind him a scholarly legacy unsurpassed in range and influence.

André Grabar was born in 1896 in Kiev; he spent his early years in that city, graduating from a lycée there in 1914. During his teens, he entertained ideas of becoming a painter, having been inspired in this ambition by his mother, who had studied art, in particular sculpture. His grandmother, also, had been a society lady with a strong interest in the arts. On finishing his schooling, he enrolled briefly as a pupil of a prominent painter of Kiev, but soon came to the conclusion that he would never be able to become a great painter himself. He decided to turn instead to the history of art, to the great good fortune of the discipline, and entered the University of St. Vladimir at Kiev, enrolling himself in the section of classical studies, which at that time included art history. However, André Grabar did continue to paint in later life, occupying his vacations from his professorial duties with what he called “des séances de peintre-amateur.” In spite of his modesty about his own artistic achievements, he derived great pleasure from the praise of visitors who saw his paintings hanging in his home.

Although the Grabar family underwent great difficulties during the years of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war, André managed to continue his education, first at the University at Kiev, then from 1915 until 1917 at Petrograd, which he left in November, a few days after the Bolsheviks had seized power. He passed

his final exams at Odessa in 1919. Among the professors with whom he studied in Petrograd were N. P. Kondakov, J. Smirnov, and D. Ainalov. In later life he spoke of his two years at Petrograd as the crucial period of his intellectual formation; this was where he began to think about iconography and the links between the religious life and its art.

By 1920 André Grabar knew that he would have to leave Russia; he had decided on a life devoted to scholarship, but he saw that conditions in Russia would render such a career difficult or impossible. Accordingly, he fled Odessa for Bulgaria, at the end of January, 1920. On reaching Sofia, he quickly obtained a post as adjunct curator at the Archaeological Museum, through the good offices of its director, Bogdan Filow. During his two-and-a-half-year tenure of this position he was charged with the responsibility of compiling an inventory of the medieval monuments in Bulgaria. This task, which the young scholar embraced with enthusiasm, involved extensive field trips throughout the country, by means of train, donkey-back, or foot. The research later bore fruit in his two-volume *thèse de doctorat* on *La peinture religieuse en Bulgarie au moyen âge*, published in Paris in 1928. However, after three summers of fieldwork in Bulgaria, he felt the need of better library facilities than Sofia was able to offer at that time. He started looking for a post in western Europe, and eventually succeeded in obtaining a position as assistant (*lecteur*) teaching the Russian language at the University of Strasbourg. He moved to France in 1922, having first become engaged to a Bulgarian medical student (and eventually doctor), Julie Ivanova, whom he married in Strasbourg in 1923. At Strasbourg their two sons, Oleg and Nicholas, were born. While at Strasbourg, Grabar came into contact with Paul Perdrizet, a Hellenist and historian of art and religion, whose intellectual rigor combined



with originality had a deep influence on the younger scholar. In later life Grabar described Perdrizet as the most influential of his mentors.

In 1928 André Grabar was given the title of "maître de conférences" at the University of Strasbourg, and was charged with teaching the history of art. He and his family seemed well settled in Alsace, but in 1937 Gabriel Millet, on retiring from his position of Director of Studies in Byzantine Art and Archaeology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris, proposed André Grabar as his successor. Grabar accepted the post, and continued to teach at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes until his retirement in 1966. In 1946 he achieved the summit of his career, being nominated Professor of Byzantine Art and Archaeology at the Collège de France, a position which he also held until 1966.

While in Paris, André Grabar taught the history of Byzantine and early medieval art, training many students who themselves were later to become prominent in the field. After the Second World War had ended, he founded and edited (with Jean Hubert) the periodical *Cahiers Archéologiques*, which became one of the leading publications in the fields of early medieval and Byzantine art history and archaeology. He also established the prestigious series of monographs *Bibliothèque des Cahiers Archéologiques*. In the post-war years he made frequent and extended visits to Dumbarton Oaks, sojourns which he remembered with warm appreciation. He participated in seven of the Byzantine symposia, between 1947 and 1960, and in 1950 he directed the symposium on "The Emperor and the Palace." He was a regular contributor to *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, and he also published there two important objects in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, an ivory pyxis of the Palaeologan period with imperial portraits, and an enameled reliquary of St. Demetrios. Although his last visit to Washington was made in 1961, he remained until his death an Honorary Associate of the Center for Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks. André Grabar's activity did not cease with his retirement in 1966, but he continued to be a major contributor to the field of Byzantine art history, especially through his numerous publications.

In the course of his long and distinguished career, André Grabar garnered many distinctions. He received honorary doctorates from the universities of Princeton, Uppsala, Athens, and Edinburgh; he was a member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of Paris, and a foreign member of many national academies; he was an Officier de la Légion d'honneur, and he also re-

ceived decorations from several countries outside of France.

Such are the facts, too briefly stated, of a long and distinguished life. Harder to encapsulate are André Grabar's great intellectual contributions, the cause of his many honors. In this age of specialization, the range of his scholarship seems extraordinary; his work encompassed Byzantine, western medieval, Slavic, and Jewish art; he wrote about wall mosaics and frescoes, floor mosaics, icons, manuscripts, metalwork, and objects of daily life. He also made fundamental contributions to the history of architecture. Throughout his career he was extremely prolific. He wrote his first article, on the frescoes in the Chapel of the Apostles in the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev, in 1917, before he left Russia. He continued to write articles and reviews until the year of his death. He once said that a scholar should publish a book every five years, but in his own life he exceeded this rate of output by a very considerable margin, writing some thirty books in all, not including several new editions of his earlier works. Among his reprinted works was his first book, *Boianskata Tsurkva (L'église de Boïana)*, which was published in Sofia in 1924, and then reissued there with new illustrations in color over fifty years later, in 1978.

Although André Grabar produced several important monographs devoted to single monuments, or groups of monuments, he will be remembered principally for his wide-ranging works of synthesis; Grabar himself considered these books, which addressed general problems of meaning and iconography, to have been his most important. His first major study of this kind was *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin*, which was initially published in Strasbourg in 1936, and subsequently twice reissued. This book not only provided a typological study of Byzantine imperial images in relation to their symbolism, ideology, and functions, but also gave a fundamental analysis of the relationships between imperial art and Christian art. It seems remarkable today that, at the time of its initial appearance, some of the older generation of Byzantinists found its methodology alien and its arguments hard to follow. Nevertheless, the book eventually established itself as a classic, whose ideas still have the power to stimulate research and debate more than fifty years after it was written.

Some seven years after the appearance of *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* followed another major study, *Martyrium*, which bore the subtitle *Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*. This two-volume work, issued in 1943 and again in

1946, examined both the art and the architecture associated with the cult of relics, and was to become perhaps his most famous publication. Among many other important topics, it discussed the origins of eastern and western church forms (particularly domed buildings with centralized plans and basilican buildings), and the relationship between the cult of relics and that of icons. In 1957 Grabar published a third major work of synthesis, *L'iconoclasme byzantin*. This book, which he subtitled *Dossier archéologique*, assembled texts as well as visual materials (including coins, seals, paintings, and mosaics) to explore the question of the Byzantine concept of the image during the iconoclastic period. Grabar's last major synthetic work was *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, which was first published in English in 1968, but which originated as the A. W. Mellon lectures in the Fine Arts, delivered at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1961. Eventually the book was also published in French, as the first part of *Les voies de la création en iconographie chrétienne*, which came out in Paris in 1979. In *Christian Iconography*, Grabar drew on a series of important earlier articles to provide a searching analysis of the ways by which Early Christian artists used their inherited vocabulary of late Roman art to express complicated Christian messages and dogmas. The book poses the question of how artists can define or imagine the irrational with the concrete means provided to them by the vocabulary of the visual arts. Grabar's discussion, which drew extensively on semiotics and linguistics, was in many respects ahead of its time; for example, he made a distinction between the history of *art* and the history of *iconography*, the latter being concerned with material culture as much as with objects of high art. This is a distinction with which art historians are still wrestling today. For much of his career, Grabar's interest in broad questions of history and culture led him to consider many categories of material that lay outside the confines of high art and the traditional purview of art history. In 1958, for example, he published an important book providing the first full documentation of the pilgrimage ampullae at Monza and Bobbio (*Ampoules de Terre Sainte*, Paris).

Another aspect of Grabar's writing that should be mentioned is that he was both willing and able

to share his knowledge and his insights with the wider public beyond the confines of the academy. Throughout his career, beginning with a book on *La décoration byzantine* published in 1928, he wrote a series of handbooks and illustrated surveys addressed to the general reader. The breadth of his interests and the liveliness of his intelligence suited him well to this difficult task of providing attractive introductions to an unfamiliar and complex field. Besides his books written expressly for the public at large, a number of his more scholarly works achieved an extensive readership among non-specialists; again, this was a tribute to the wide-ranging importance of his ideas.

André Grabar himself said that what gave him pleasure and satisfaction in his work was the discovery of "explications correctes dans des cas difficiles," a kind of decoding of works of art, which would reveal hitherto hidden aspects of past cultures. He was always concerned with the integration of works of art into their cultural contexts, with the consideration of all aspects of visual culture as historical evidence, and with the semantic structures of images. André Grabar was very much a scholar who made pictures his texts, and who looked for ways to make the images produced by a society speak to the historian with as much impact and clarity as its written documents. When he was ninety-three, he was invited by *Le Monde* to describe the books that had most influenced him. It is significant that Grabar declined to list any printed texts, but instead preferred to speak first of a monument—the church of St. Sophia at Kiev, under whose shadow he had grown up: "Je la voyais tous les jours et elle était au centre d'événements réguliers et importants: fêtes religieuses, anniversaires de l'empereur, etc. Cet édifice, ses mosaïques purement byzantines m'ont très tôt marqué et inspiré."

The thinking of André Grabar is a continuing source of instruction, pleasure, and admiration for the intelligence with which he questioned medieval works of art for their meaning and significance. Although he is no longer with us, his students and his readers will continue to reap new harvests from the seeds that he has sown.

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